

Dalai Lama meets Muslim leaders

From correspondents in San Francisco | April 16, 2006

THE Dalai Lama has defended Islam at an historic religious gathering in San Francisco today, saying suicide bombings were tragic "mischief" that could plague any religion.

The Dalai Lama took centre stage at an unprecedented anti-terror summit with Muslim clerics and other religious leaders from around the world.

Tibet's spiritual leader came in response to a prominent California imam's invitation to help form a "United Nations of Religion" devoted to countering extremist violence.

Imam Seyed Mehdi Khorasani said the idea came after he met Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso in the US state of Idaho late last year.

Religious leaders and scholars from approximately 30 countries were brought to San Francisco, which Khorasani said was selected because it was where the United Nations was founded.

Among the supporters of the religious solidarity movement was former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, leader of that country's largest Muslim organisation Nadhlatul Ulama, which has 40 million members.

Holland Taylor delivered a letter from Mr Wahid praising the gathering and offering to align himself with the Dalai Lama in future meetings of the newly established group.

"What is going on is a struggle for the soul of Islam," Mr Taylor said.

He said Mr Wahid and other top Muslim leaders were on the Dalai Lama's side in the "tug-of-war" against religious extremist.

Mr Taylor referred to Sunni and Shiite leaders forming a public alliance with the Dalai Lama as "ideological jujitsu" to deflect the power of radicals and unite moderates that represent "the true heart of Islam".

Organisers heralded the assembly as the establishment of a multi-religious body that will work to quell violence and promote harmony between people of different faiths.

"I'm excited and so very happy," the Dalai Lama told an invitation-only crowd of 500 people gathered in the Mark Hopkins Hotel on Nob Hill.

"Because nowadays, to some people, the Muslim tradition appears more militant. I feel that's totally wrong. Muslim, like any other tradition, is the practice of compassion."

Suicide bombings and other violence by extremists have unfairly skewed the world's perception of Islam, the Dalai Lama said.

"Such mischievous people are not just in the Muslim community, but among the Hindus, the Christians, the Buddhists," he said. "In any community, a few mischievous people are always there."

"Generally, I consider myself a compassionate person, but if my emotion gets out of control, then this compassionate person no longer is a compassionate person."

The Dalai Lama urged the leaders of all faiths to stand together on their common ground to defend Islam and promote the ideal of respecting the faiths of individuals while embracing religious diversity in communities.

The Dalai Lama lauded the example of society in India, where Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhists live as neighbours.

"When I see conflict in the name of religion in Ireland, Pakistan, and now in Iraq," the Dalai Lama said, "then I think India's tradition of living together in religious harmony is wonderful."

Modern cultures are so unavoidably entwined, that it is vital to foster respect between people of different religions, the spiritual leader said.

"The new reality is that everything is interconnected," the Dalai Lama said. "Especially in the Arab world, due to oil, and in China because of the economy. All the world is becoming one small community."

"Now, we must find a way to work out the contradictions between religions."